



## Mundane distortions in the Divine discourse of Bhagvad-Gita

By BS Murthy

William von Humboldt who wrote seven-hundred verses in praise of the Bhagvad-Gita averred that it is the most beautiful, perhaps the only true philosophical song existing in any known tongue. All the same, the boon of an oral tradition that kept the divine discourse of yore alive for millennia became the bane of the Gita going by the seemingly mundane distortions it had to endure. Strangely it was Sir Edwin Arnold the Englishman who sought to separate the divine wheat from the mundane chaff by branding s23-s27 of ch8 as the ranting of some *vedanti* in his century old 'Song Celestial'. While interpreting the Gita in English verse an attempt was made by the author to identify the interpolations in it and codify the same for the benefit of the modern reader. One way to scent the nature of these, if not zero in on every one of them, is to subject the text to the twin tests of sequential conformity and structural economy. Sequential conformity is all about uniformity of purpose sans digression and structural economy but represents the absence of repetitiveness.

The pundits and the plebeians alike aver that the philosophy of the Gita is the practice of disinterested action. In this context it may be noted that while postulating *nishkaama* karma, the theory of disinterested action, Krishna was critical of the ritualistic aspects of and the mundane expectations from the Vedic ceremonies (s42 - 46 and s53 of ch.2.). Given that the pristine philosophy of the Gita is to tend man on the path of duty without attachment, **the about turn in s9-s16 of Ch.3** that formulate the procedural aspects of the rituals and the divine backing they enjoy cannot stand to either reason or logic. Such contradictory averments attributed to Krishna wherever occur can be taken as interpolations and the same are delved into in this article.

Next on the agenda is the aspect of structural economy and one finds the similitude of a given content in many a *sloka* in the same or in a different context throughout the text. Obviously, some of them are interpolations but which were the originals and which are the imitations could be impossible to find out for they smugly fit into the overall structure. Whatever, save lengthening the discourse, they do not belittle the same and fortunately not even tire the reader, thanks to the exemplary charm of Sanskrit, which for the 18th Century British intellectual Sir William Jones 'is of wonderful structure, more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin and more

exquisitely refined than either.' Identified here are 110 *slokas* of deviant character or digressive nature that can be taken as interpolations with reasonable certainty. Readers may like to mark these verses in their Gita and then read it afresh by passing over them for a refreshing experience.

Besides the interpolations s9-s16 of ch.3, s17, s18 and s24 of the same are clear digressions. Such others in the rest of the chapters wherever they crop up are dealt as follows:

**Chapter - 4:** It should not be lost on one that s11's return of favour by the Lord is juxtaposing to the stated detachment of His as espoused in s14 of the same chapter. On the other hand, s12 that is akin to s20, ch.7, itself an interpolation, and s13 the contentious *chaatur varnyam mayaa srutam* - do not jell with the spirit of the philosophy. Why hasn't Krishna declared in s 29 ch.9, 'None I favour, slight I none / Devout Mine but gain Me true'. Slokas 24 to s32 that are of religious/ritualistic nature seem clearly out of context and character. Prior to this seemingly interpolated body of eleven *slokas*, the nature of the Supreme Spirit and the conduct of those who realize it are dealt with. Thus, the discontinuity in the text brought about by the body of these interpolative *slokas* would be self-evident. And s34 that advises Arjuna to seek wise counsel is irrelevant in the context of the discourse fashioned to set his doubts at rest in the battlefield itself.

**Chapter-5:** S18 avers the Omnipresence of the Supreme in Brahmans, cows, elephants, dogs and dog eaters. This tasteless description could be but an interpolation as it ill behoves Krishna's eloquence and sophistication of expression seen throughout. Incidentally, the succeeding s19 makes it clear that whoever recognizes Him in all beings attains the Supreme State in life itself. S27-s28 that deal with yogic practices and s29, which asserts the Supreme as the beneficiary of sacrificial rituals, are but interpolation for reasons that bear no repetition.

**Chapter - 6:** S10-s17 deal with aspects of ascetic practices which are but square pegs in the round philosophical hole the discourse is and so are interpolations, even going by what is stated in the very opening verse, 'Forego none if forsake chores / Eye not gain 'n thou be freed'. S41 and s42 are clearly interpolations not only for affecting the continuity of the text but also for what they contain. S41 would have us that those who perform the *asvamedha* (ritualistic horse sacrifice) would reach heaven to be born again rich. Likewise, s 42 would have us that, 'or such would be born in learned homes'.

**Chapter-7:** S20-s23 besides affecting the continuity in character of the discourse, would advocate worship of gods for boon seeking that Krishna chastises in s42-s44, ch.2 and that renders them interpolations.

**Chapter - 8:** It can be seen that s5 places the cart before the horse. Besides, s9-s14 too are interpolations going by their content that's out of context. It is worth noting that s1-s4, s6-s8 and s15-s22, if read together would bear an unmistakable continuity of argument that the interpolations deprive. And s22 is a seemingly concluding statement of the Lord that only through un-swerved devotion the Supreme could be reached from which there is no return (s21). Then appear s23 to s27 which if literally taken would imply that if one dies when the moon is on the ascent he would go to heaven and, to hell if it's other way round. Needless to say, these *slokas* spelling superstition in an otherwise thought-elevating treatise are but interpolations which Sir Edwin Arnold dismissed as the work of some *vedanti* and thought it fit, justifiably at that, not to include them in his 'Song Celestial'. In this connection it may be noted that the relationship between the state in which a person dies and his imminent rebirth is covered in s14 - s15 of c14, which seem to be authentic.

**Chapter -9:** S7, that contravenes s15-s16 of ch.8, and which echoes interpolative s18-s19 of the current chapter, is an interpolation. Also s15 of is but a digression to facilitate the interpolations in s16-s21 and s23-s25. What is more, there could be some omissions from the original, given the seemingly incomplete exposition of the promised dharma in s2. Further, in s 30 and s 31, it is said that even a reformed sinner is dear and valuable to Him. Then in s 32 it is stated that women, Vaisyas and Sudras could win His favour through devotion, sounding as if they are all in an inferior league. Leave aside the Lord's averment in many a context in this text that the Supreme Spirit lies in all beings, it is specifically stated in s34 of ch.10 that He symbolizes all that is glorious in woman. Given this, and the background of the interpolations, s32 surely is a case of trespass. S33 of this chapter is but a jointing medium of the said obnoxious verse and in itself is patronizing in nature towards the virtuous Brahmins and thus is an interpolation.

**Chapter – 11:** Owing to the improbability of their being, s9-s14, make an amusing reading. S3 states that Krishna grants Arjuna the divine sight required to espy His Universal Form. Of course, the ESP that Vyasa granted Sanjaya (s75 ch.18) might have enabled him to monitor the goings on at the battleground in order to appraise the blind king Dhrutarashtra about the same. Thus, only from Arjuna's averments could have Sanjaya gathered what he was divining of the Universal Form, which obviously was beyond his (Sanjaya) own comprehension. But s10-s14 would have him describe the Universal Form as though he himself was witnessing the same, even before Arjuna utters a word about it. In this context it is worth noting that the Lord made it clear in s52, 'Ever craved gods 'n angels too / Just to behold what thee beheld'. Thus, the Universal Form that was seen by Arjuna surely was beyond the scope of Sanjaya's ESP and hence, s9-s14 that picture beforehand what Arjuna would witness later on are clear interpolations. Contrast this with the parallel situation in s50-s51, when the Lord reassumes His human form, but handled differently by Sanjaya. The s29 which seeks to emphasize what was already pictured in s28, albeit with not so appropriate a simile, could be but an interpolation.

**Chapter -13:** One might notice that s10, advocating asceticism to which Krishna is opposed, doesn't jell with the rest, either contextually or philosophically, and thus should be seen as an interpolation. S22, which states that the Supreme Soul lay in beings as a sustainer, consentor, enjoyer and overseer, contravenes its very nature expostulated in s16-s18, ch.15. Besides, as can be seen, it affects the continuity between s21 and s23 of this chapter. S30, akin to s15 is an irrelevant interpolation.

**Chapter- 14:** In this chapter that details the three human proclivities - virtue, passion and delusion- s3, s4 and s19 that deal with the Nature and the Spirit are digressive interpolations.

**Chapter – 15:** S9, s12, s13, s14 and s15 being digressions are clearly interpolations.

**Chapter – 16:** S19 which implies that the Supreme Spirit condemns to hell those who hate Him is an obvious interpolation that contravenes Krishna's affirmative statement in s29 ch.9 and other such averred in many a context in this text.

**Chapter-17:** S11-s13 that deal with the virtuous, the passionate and the deluded in ritualistic sense and s 23 -28 concerning Om, Tat, Sat and Asat of the Vedic hymns are clear interpolations for reasons the reader is familiar with. However, s7-s10, which deal with the food habits of the virtuous, the passionate and the deluded would pose a problem in determining whether or not they are interpolations. Can eating habits be linked to the innate nature of man in an infallible manner? Perhaps, some future research and analysis might resolve the universality or otherwise of this averment, and till then, it is appropriate to reserve the judgment on these.

**Chapter -18:** One can note that s12 breaks the continuity between s11 and s13 with hyperbolic averments and s56 combines what is stated in the preceding and the succeeding *slokas*, and thus both are seemingly interpolations. S41- s48 that describe the allotted duties of man on the basis of his caste are clearly interpolations. In essence, the discourse till s40 is about the human nature and how it affects man. As can be seen, the duties on caste lines detailed in the said interpolations have no continuity of argument. As in earlier chapters, the text acquires continuity if only these verses are bypassed. S61 avers that the Supreme dwells in humans and deludes them all by his *maya*. This is contrary to what is stated in s14, c5, 'It's his nature but not Spirit / Makes man act by wants induced'. Thus, s61 clearly is an interpolation as it contravenes the neutrality of the Supreme Spirit in the affairs of man affirmed throughout by Lord Krishna.

For those who may like to see how the Gita reads if the above cited 110 *slokas* are bypassed, the same are summarized as under.

**Ch. 3:** s9 –s18, s24 and s35 (12 *slokas*); **Ch.4:** s11 - s 13, s24- s32 and s34 (13 *slokas*); **Ch.5:** s18 and s27 -29 (4 *slokas*) ; **Ch. 6:** s10-s17 and s41 -s42 (10 *slokas*) ; **Ch.7:** s20 –s23 (4 *slokas*) ; ch.8: s5, s9- s14 and s23-s28 ( 13 *slokas*) ; **Ch.9:** s7,s15-s21, s23-s25, and s32-s34 (14 *slokas*) ; **Ch.11:** s9- s14 and s29 (7 *slokas*) ; **Ch.13:** s10, s22 and s30 (3 *slokas*) ;**Ch.14:** s3 -s4 and s19(3 *slokas*) ; **Ch.15:** s9 and s12- s15 (5 *slokas*) ; **Ch.16:** s19 (1 *sloka*) ; **Ch.17:** s11- s14 and s23- 28 (10 *slokas*) and **Ch.18:** s12, s41-48, s56 and s61(11 *slokas*).

Note: The author's 590 verse-*Bhagvad-Gita: Treatise of self-help* sans the above interpolative *slokas* can be read in this site and others as well at <https://g.co/kgs/AaoCWV>